

News Release

Senator Pete V. Domenici

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DOMENICI WANTS DROUGHT REPORT TO IMPROVE RESPONSE TO "CREEPING DISASTER"

National Drought Policy Commission Submits Report to Congress

WASHINGTON -- With drought conditions aggravating an already disastrous fire season in New Mexico and the Southwest, U.S. Senator Pete Domenici today said he wants a just-completed comprehensive report on drought disasters to spur greater coordination of national, state and local responses to the threat and impact of droughts.

Domenici and Representative Joe Skeen, who together authored the 1998 law creating the National Drought Policy Commission, today accepted the commission's first recommendations to Congress on how to improve the nation's response to droughts, which Domenici termed "creeping disasters."

"Droughts are creeping disasters. They tend to develop over a long period of time, unlike other weather emergencies. Droughts can lead to short-term disasters like enhanced fire danger and also have long-term consequences to agriculture, water availability, and local economics. The damage lingers on for months and sometimes years after the rains finally come," Domenici said.

"The forest and wildfires breaking out all over New Mexico are aggravated by drought conditions that began last fall. Could we have had a better response to these drought conditions? I think so, and hope that the recommendations made in this report will spur Congress and states to begin better coordination of how we address drought situations," he said. "The purpose of the National Drought Policy Commission was to define federal efforts for coordinated drought mitigation and response. A coordinated policy is crucial. If such a comprehensive policy had been in place, there might have been better responses to the drought problems facing New Mexico, the Southwest and other regions of the country."

The commission, which began meeting last July, was mandated to make recommendations on a permanent and systematic federal process to address drought situations. The recommendations were to address means for improving a coordinated response by federal, state, tribal and local governments to droughts in the United States.

The report comes as the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, which runs the government's weather forecasting, predicted a major drought this summer in the Southwest, Upper Midwest and the South.

In its report to Domenici and Skeen, the commission recommended that national drought policy “favor preparedness over insurance, insurance over relief, and incentives to procedures and others to plan for droughts.” The commission recommended that Congress establish a permanent National Drought Council to coordinate the many federal programs currently involved in drought issues and to foster partnerships with state and local governments, as well as non-government groups. Additional public information and training efforts are also suggested.

New Mexicans who served on the commission included state emergency management director Ernesto Rodríguez and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Eluid Martínez, who represented the Interior Department.

More details about the National Drought Policy Commission report are available from the following U.S. Department of Agriculture web site: **<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/drought>**.